

TRAVEL

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# A pilgrim's progress

**In Rameshwaram, everything revolves around the famous Ramanathaswamy Temple, says SHREYA SHUKLA**

**TRAVEL**

I was still in India so there was no reason to feel jet-lagged. But two flights and a three-hour drive through dry countryside had left me semi-comatose. And then suddenly, I snapped out of my languor. In the distance, beyond blue-green waters, an island loomed in sight. I could also see slanting roofs interspersed with towering temple spires.

I was wide awake by the time we reached the middle of Pamban Bridge connecting the Indian mainland at Mandapam to Rameshwaram, the famous island. The century-old Pamban rail bridge cut through the brilliant water on my left and, on my right, was a stretch of the island with fishing boats bobbing lazily near the shore.

If you're in Rameshwaram, and aren't a local, you're almost certainly a pilgrim. For life in this quaint temple town — set on the island of the same name — revolves around the Ramanathaswamy Temple, a key pilgrim destination for Hindus. It's also intricately linked with Valmiki's *Ramayana* as it is believed that after the war in Lanka, Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, performed a *yagna* to invoke Lord Shiva on the site where the temple now stands.

I'd arrived on a day-trip to experience a snippet of a longer tour created by Daiwik Hotels, called In the Footsteps of Lord Rama, that takes you on a whistle-stop tour of 13 pilgrim sites in the region.

One of the newest players in the pilgrimage game, Daiwik Hotels aims to grow into India's first specialty chain of four-star pilgrimage hotels. Rameshwaram is their first property, and it keeps a keen eye open for the needs of pilgrims. For instance, it offers an activity room for religious discourses (Maitri) and also a pilgrim assist desk.

Besides that, the hotel offers an Ayurvedic spa.

Dhanushkodi, where the Indian Ocean meets the Bay of Bengal, is considered sacred by pilgrims

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DAIWIK HOTELS




MAP NOT TO SCALE

And for meals, there's Ahaan, the vegetarian restaurant that serves delectable south Indian dishes.

The next day, I joined the serpentine trail of pilgrims winding its way through the lanes leading to Ramanathaswamy Temple. The belief goes that Rama dispatched Hanuman to Mount Kailash to fetch a crystal *lingam* for his *yagna*, but when Hanuman failed to return by the appointed hour, Sita formed one out of sand. Both of the *lingams* are worshipped in the temple's sanctum sanctorum.

There are 22 *teerthams* or wells and tanks within the temple's precincts where pilgrims bathe before their offerings. My guide from Daiwik led me through one of the temple's long, vibrantly painted corridors before stopping near a lotus tank.

Perched on a ledge, above the tank, stood a man brandishing a bucket tied to a rope. He indicated that I was about to be doused with water, like half-a-dozen drenched pilgrims who had skidded,

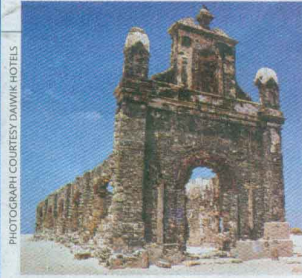
PHOTOGRAPH BY SHREYA SHUKLA



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The Ramanathaswamy Temple, with its vibrantly painted corridors (below) is one of the most important pilgrim destinations for Hindus



An old church stands in ruins in Dhanushkodi town that was ravaged by a cyclone in 1964

### TRAVEL LOG

**Getting there:** There are flights from Calcutta to Madurai via Chennai. Hire a car from Madurai to Rameshwaram. Daiwik Hotels also arranges pickups and drops.  
**Staying there:** Stay at Daiwik Hotels ([www.daiwikhotels.com](http://www.daiwikhotels.com)).



SHREYA SHUKLA

soaked to the skin, out of the place before me, heading to the next *teertham*.

We spent the next hour visiting other parts of the temple. "All the weddings that take place in Ramanathaswamy are performed here," said my guide, ushering me into the Parvati shrine with its vermillion-covered pillars.

A short walk from the temple took us to Agni Teertham, which is marked by orange gateways leading to the sea. Rama

is believed to have bathed in the sea here before the *yagna*, so a dip in the waters is believed to wash away one's sins. Pilgrims bathe here before heading to Ramanathaswamy. Although, I'd visited the temple before going to Agni Teertham.

The Daiwik tour takes you by car to a number of spots on the island, from its highest point to its farthest. We stopped at the Gandhamadan Parvatam Temple, located on a hillock, from where Hanu-

man is said to have leaped to Lanka.

And tiny waves broke in the aquamarine sea when we reached Vilundi Teertham. Here, a long ramp jutted into the sea and had a well at the end of it. It is said that Rama created a sweet water spring here with his arrow to quench Sita's thirst.

But one of the highlights of the tour was reserved for the end. A one-hour ride out of town took us to the southernmost tip of the island, where the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean meet. The confluence of the waters at Dhanushkodi is believed to be sacred. A cyclone in 1964 had ravaged the place, so the drive to the spot takes you through the skeleton of the old town. The top of an old church stands near the remains of the old railway offices and a railway seat peeks out near a crumbled wall of the destroyed station.

It was a fitting end to a memorable day. As I stood on a piece of driftwood near the confluence, I let the experience wash over me. That's what Rameshwaram does to you — it submerges you in a mélange of vivid images that don't tarnish with time. ♦